Brian Dillon on Nina Katchadourian

I saw this piece at Sara Melter Gallery, New York, in December 2007. I knew a little of Nina Katchadourian’s work already, but all I knew of this exhibition was that it had something to do with animals. It was a great show. When I met the artist a couple of days later, I only wanted to ask her about this one work.

At first glance, the order proposed by The Continuum of Cute seems straightforward, even self-evident: one hundred tiny photographs, each image a stage in the transition from a living thing that is ugly as sin (can it be a real creature, this object which is all mouth and busy feelers?) to the most beautiful of animals (a bumbling little ball of white fur and curiosity). Before long, though, one starts to scan the middle of the grid—it has also been exhibited as a slim horizon on the gallery wall—for the essential photograph that must exist: the missing link (but how could there be a link at all?) between the pug-ugly and the winsome, the heart-warming and the skin-crawling. But the aesthetic fulcrum is one there, and not only because you cannot decide which is cuter, a hippo or a manatee. The central uncertainty spreads in both directions, and pretty soon warty toads and waffled fowl start to look oddly endearing, loutish and kittens unaccountably grotesque.

The cute—subject of Katchadourian’s elegantly unnerving (though not definitive) arrangement of animal portraits found on the internet—is among the most ambiguous and least analyzable of aesthetic categories. Etymologically, it is unexpectedly sharp and knowing: the word is derived from “acute” and still retains something of its sense of smartness or sass. Don’t get cute, we say. At the same time, it functions as a less overt, somewhat disengaged, designator for sexual attractiveness. Sure, we all know about the cute girl. It’s also, in a lesser degree, a way of marking the cute boy. But cute is mostly a sort of beauty softened by innocence—albeit an innocence that we sometimes suspect is feigned—and a helpfulness that borders on the annoyingly ingratiating. We’re hooked by the cute, but we know it’s a game: an infantilized (for us as much as the object) delibiterated version of proper aesthetic experience. Then again, it unsettles apparently more salient categories. What, for instance, is the opposite of the cute? Is it the ugly, the disgusting, the creepy, the absurd, the horrifying? Or the austere, the reserved, the haughty, even perhaps the elegant?

A narrative of sorts keeps folding back on itself: Big eyes are cute, but not those insectal eyes of a fluffy ears must be cute, except when they turn semitransparent; furiness is certainly cute (the last fifteen examples are all mammals), but doesn’t that hairless guinea pig have a certain babyish charm? Is anthropomorphism cute? Not when it manifests as an eerie blob with a balloon nose and dismal expression. Much of Katchadourian’s varied work explores this limit zone—as comical as it is fundamental—between the human and the animal. She has observed unlikely cross-species friendships, taught birdsong to United Nations translators, cross-dressed a mouse and a snake in (rather cute) costumes, worn a mustache made of twin caterpillars. With The Continuum of Cute, she shows us our aesthetic, emotional, and biological distance from the animal world in which we persist in seeing images of ourselves. It’s the squirrel that gets me, with his tilted head, brushy ears, and crossed paws: he is sickeningly cute.
